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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted regarding the perceived training needs of 180 members of multidisciplinary evaluation teams in Georgia. The teams determine the eligibility of students referred for learning disability placement. The respondents, who included school psychologists and special class teachers, indicated a need for training in determining eligibility in language areas, in determining the eligibility of 5- or 6-year-old students, and in documenting the use of professional judgment in determining eligibility. (Author)

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An Assessment of the Training Needs of School Psychologists and Special Educator Teachers in Determining the Eligibility of Students for Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

A survey was conducted regarding the training needs of 180 members of the multidisciplinary evaluation teams which determine the eligibility of students referred for learning disability placement. The respondents, school psychologists and special class teachers, indicated a need for training in determining eligibility in language areas, in determining the eligibility of five or six-year old students and in documenting the use of professional judgement in determining eligibility.

Introduction

Few areas of special education have prompted as much controversy as has the process of identifying students with learning disabilities (Chalfant, 1985). Disagreements among professionals range from differences regarding the definition of learning disabilities (Hammill, Leigh, McNutt, & Larsen, 1981) to the actual procedures by which students are identified (e.g., Dangel & Ensminger, 1988; Kavale, 1987; Keogh, 1987; Reynolds 1984-1985).

Much of the concern about identifying learning disabled (LD) students involves the training of the multidisciplinary team which is mandated to identify LD students (i.e., psychologist, LD teacher, and regular class representative) and the ability of the multidisciplinary team to make objective decisions about students' eligibility. Researchers have found that LD teachers frequently do not understand the criteria use for identifying a student as learning disabled (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Casey, 1984) and that there are wide differences among team members is their perceptions of whether a student meets stated eligibility criteria (Davis & Shepard, 1983; Epps, McGue, & Ysseldyke, 1984).

The need for additional training for members of the multidisciplinary evaluation team in Georgia became apparent in the 1986 Needs Assessment by the Comprehensive System of Manpower Development (CSPD) Teachers of LD students and school psychologists indicated that their greatest need for additional training was in determining the eligibility for students referred for possible LD services (Georgia Department of Education, 1986). This need for training in determining eligibility was further documented in the CSPD report which noted that the most frequently identified area of noncompliance in the of the State Department of Education monitoring reports of local school systems was in determining eligibility.

Criteria for placing a student in a class for the learning disabled vary widely from state to state (U.S. Department of Education, 1987), although most states have determining the existence of a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement as part of the eligibility criteria. The procedure adopted by the state of Georgia is a standard score comparison between intelligence and achievement and is typical of most other states (Chalfant, 1985). A student must exhibit a

severe discrepancy between ability and achievement, as well as evidence of a processing problem in basic learning behaviors.

Method

In an effort to address concerns about the training of the multidisciplinary evaluation teams, a committee composed of representatives of the Georgia Department of Education, Georgia Learning Resource System (GLRS), public school systems and college/universities drafted a needs assessment survey to determine the type of help that Georgia special educators and psychologists needed in order to determine the eligibility of students referred for possible placement in classes for learning disabled (LD) students.

Surveys were distributed at the state administrator's conference, as well as through the Georgia Learning Resources System, a statewide network of educational support/training centers to special educators, school psychologists, and regular class teachers.

Results

Respondents

A total of 180 surveys from all regions of the state were returned. These surveys were from 136 special education teachers (76% of the total) and 44 school psychologists (24%). The responding teachers were an experienced group with 122 of the 136 teachers having 5 or more years of experience and 32% of the teachers with 14 or more years of experience. Psychologists who responded were also an experienced group, with 54% of them indicating nine or more years of experience.

Responses to the Survey

Responses to the seven major items of the needs assessment survey are presented below. Table 1 reports the results to the question " Have you experienced difficulty understanding and implementing the LD eligibility requirements in your system?"

Table 1.

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING AND IMPLEMENTION THE LD ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS IN YOUR SYSTEM?

	YES	NO	NO RESPONSE
Special Educators	50 (38%)	83 (61%)	2 (1.5%)
Psychologists	32 (76%)	10 (23%)	2 (4.5%)
Total	82 (45%)	93 (51%)	4 (2%)

If yes, specify the specific problem areas:

22 (12%)	What are the rules? What is adequate documentation?
17 (9.4%)	Not enough time, too much paperwork.
15 (8.3%)	Regulations are vague, too strict, or changing.
12 (6.7%)	Not trained, unfamiliar with the statement of status.
12 (6.7%)	No tests available.
7 (3.8%)	Conflict with the SDE monitors.
7 (3.8%)	What about those who don't meet the criteria but are LD?
4 (2.2%)	How do we deal with those low in language?
7 (3.8%)	Other responses

Special educators were somewhat less likely than school psychologists to indicate that they had problems implementing the LD eligibility requirements (38% to 76%). Open-ended responses indicating the major reasons that respondents felt they had had trouble implementing the regulations dealt with a lack of clarity in the regulations and the paperwork and documentation necessary to establish eligibility.

The second question asked the respondents to identify in which, if any, of the seven achievement areas which make up LD eligibility it was difficult to determine that is there was a severe achievement discrepancy.

Table 2.

STUDENTS REFERRED FOR LD ARE EXAMINED IN EACH OF SEVEN AREAS TO DETERMINE IF THERE IS A SEVERE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THEIR LEVEL OF FUNCTIONING AND THEIR POTENTIAL. THESE AREAS ARE LISTED BELOW. WHICH, IF ANY, NEED FURTHER CLARIFICATION.

86 (43%) Listening Compreh.	7 (3.4%) Basic reading skills
88 (43%) Oral Expression	7 (3.4%) Reading comprehension
72 (35%) Written Expression	6 (3.4%) Math calculation
	8 (3.9%) Math reasoning

The three language areas, listening comprehension (45%), oral expression (43%), and written expression (35%) were identified as having the greatest need for clarification. The areas of reading and mathematics all had less than 4% of the respondents who identified these as in need of further clarification.

The third question asked how frequently the respondents identified five and six year-olds as learning disabled.

Table 3.

HOW OFTEN ARE FIVE AND SIX YEAR-OLDS IN YOUR SYSTEM IDENTIFIED AS LD?

	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Cannot say
Special educators	59 (43%)	30 (22%)	9 (6.7%)	38 (28%)
Psychologists	29 (65%)	12 (27%)	2 (4.5%)	1 (2.2%)
Total	88 (49%)	42 (23%)	11 (6.1%)	39 (22%)

Do you perceive this as a problem?

Yes	No	No Response
78 (43%)	60 (33%)	44 (24%)

Most frequently mentioned reasons:

47 (26%)	There is a need to identify young children.
38 (21%)	Only the most severe are identified, mildly handicapped students must wait to fail more.
11 (6.1%)	Children should be labeled and served at a young age.
7 (3.8%)	Tests are not valid for young children.

Twice as many respondents in both groups (special educators, and school psychologists) indicated that five and six year-olds were rarely placed in LD classes than indicated young students were occasionally placed in LD classes. More than a quarter of the special educators responded that they did not know how frequently five and six year-olds were placed in LD classes.

A total of 43% of the respondents wrote that placing these students was a problem. The most commonly stated reasons for the difficulty in identifying young

children as LD was seen as a problem all dealt with concerns about the need to identify and serve LD students as early as possible, e.g., "only the severe problems are currently identified while the more mild problems must wait until they failed some more".

The next area of questions involved the role of professional judgment in identifying a LD student.

Table 4

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN A CHILD'S ELIGIBILITY FOR LD SERVICES DOES NOT FALL WITHIN PRESCRIBED STATE CRITERIA (SEVERE DISCREPANCY), BUT YOU BELIEVE THAT THE CHILD DOES, IN FACT, HAVE A LEARNING DISABILITY?

70	(39%)	Look for additional documentation..
50	(28%)	Use professional judgment (45% of school psychologists responded yes, compared to only 20% of special educators).
25	(14%)	Don't place the student.
20	(11%)	Help regular education make adaptations.
19	(10.5%)	Contact other professionals (e.g., psychologist, principal, or supervisor).
17	(9.4%)	Want to use professional judgment but cannot.
9	(5%)	Other responses

Most respondents indicated that they would look for a way to apply professional judgment, either by finding additional documentation or by actually using professional judgment. More than twice as many school psychologists indicated that they used professional

judgment than did special educators. Additional frequent responses were to help with regular education adaptations (probably through the Student Support Teams) and to work with other professionals.

Table 5.

DO YOU HAVE PROBLEMS DETERMINING THE KINDS OF INFORMATION THAT WOULD JUSTIFY THE PLACEMENT OF A STUDENT IN LD FOR WHOM A SEVERE DISCREPANCY DID NOT EXIST ?
IF SO, DESCRIBE YOUR CONCERNS.

	Yes	No	No Response
Special educators	53 (39%)	78 (57%)	5 (3.7%)
Psychologists	21 (48%)	20 (45%)	3 (6.8%)
Total	74 (41%)	98 (54%)	8 (4.4%)

31 (17%)	How much/what kind of information meets state criteria, regulations are not specific.
23 (13%)	Invalid or misleading IQ tests, weakness of tests.
14 (7.7%)	Conflict with SDE monitoring.
13 (7.2%)	How do I document a processing deficit?

Psychologists were somewhat more likely than special educators to indicate that they had problems with determining the kinds of information needed to justify a student's placement in the event that a severe discrepancy did not exist (48% to 39%). The reasons most commonly listed for the problems were uncertainty as to the type or amount of information required to meet

state regulations and State Department of Education monitoring. Other concerns were about invalid or misleading tests, especially intelligence tests.

Table 6.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE "PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT" TO INITIALLY QUALIFY A STUDENT AS LEARNING DISABLED?

	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	No Resp.
Special educators	96 (71%)	35 (26%)	1 (.78%)	4 (3%)
Psychologists	29 (66%)	13 (30%)	2 (4.5%)	
Total	125 (69%)	48 (27%)	3 (1.7%)	4 (2.2%)

HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE "PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT" TO REQUALIFY QUALIFY A STUDENT AS LEARNING DISABLED?

	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	No Resp.
Special educators	61 (45%)	55 (40%)	13 (10%)	7 (5%)
Psychologists	22 (50%)	17 (39%)	4 (9.1%)	1 (2.3%)
Total	83 (46%)	72 (40%)	17 (9.4%)	8 (4.4%)

Why or why not

33 (18%)	I use professional judgment.
26 (14%)	I have not problem in this area.
17 (9.4%)	Monitoring/ SDE problems.
16 (8.8%)	Re-evaluations are unfair.
12 (6.6%)	No room for deviation, rules are black and white--no gray area allowed.
10 (5.5%)	LEA says no.
14 (7.7)	Other responses

Psychologists and special educators differed very little in their responses to these items. They were both reluctant to use professional judgment to initially

place a student (only 3 respondents--less than 2%--indicated that they frequently use professional judgment for initial placement compared to 69% who indicated that they rarely used professional judgment). On the other hand, nearly ten percent of both groups indicated that they frequently use professional judgment to requalify LD students while the number who said they rarely used it to requalify a student dropped to less than half. The respondents indicated that problems with monitoring and the State Department of Education, regulations which don't allow room for deviation and unfair reevaluation procedures were the major reasons for not using professional judgment.

Table 7.

WHAT INFORMATION FROM THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REPORT IS CRUCIAL IN DETERMINING LD ELIGIBILITY?

114 (63%)	Strengths/ weaknesses, profile of subtest, psychological processes, academics.
111 (62%)	Full-scale IQ.
25 (14%)	Severe discrepancy.
11 (6.1%)	Psychologist's suggestions
4 (2.2%)	Recommendations for remediation.

Most respondents indicated patterns of strengths and weaknesses, subtest profiles and psychological

processes, and the full-scale IQ as important factors in determining LD eligibility. The severe discrepancy was mentioned by only 14% of the respondents. Interestingly, 11 educators indicated that the psychologist's suggestions regarding whether the student qualified was the most important information.

Discussion

Many of the respondents, especially school psychologists, indicated that they had difficulty interpreting the regulations for identifying LD students. The predominance of school psychologists who expressed this concern may be due to the the differences in the jobs of the two groups. School psychologists spend a major portion of their time determining whether students meet the eligibility criteria for special education classes, while special class teachers have instruction of their students as their major responsibility. Fewer special educators in this survey indicated that determining LD eligibility was a problem for them than in earlier surveys, i.e., 38% of special class teachers in this survey compared to 89% in the CSPD training needs survey (Georgia Department of Education, 1986).

Both special educators and psychologists expressed concerns about identifying students with language handicaps (listening comprehension, oral expression, and written expression). Their concern is probably due to the fact that language is a process rather than a produce of instruction, and, therefore, requires a dynamic assessment for which few standardized tests are available. Training programs for teachers and psychologists also tend to place less emphasis on language skills and processing than on assessing and teaching academic areas. On the other hand, assessment procedures have been clearly established in reading and mathematics, and so these areas are not seen as difficult to determine achievement levels. The respondents' concerns about identifying younger students probably overlaps with the difficulty in assessing language problems, because so many five and six-year-old students exhibit only language problems, rather than problems in the products of instruction, i.e., reading and mathematics. It is not surprising that more special class teachers than psychologists were not aware of whether their school system. Teachers are typically assigned to specific grade-levels of students and, thus,

may be unaware of placement/eligibility practices on other grade levels, while school psychologists are more likely to work with students across levels.

The respondents noted that, although they were aware of the option of using professional judgment, they seldom employed professional judgment to initially place a student. They did, however, use it to requalify students. This is probably because by the time the three-year period passes between the initial eligibility and reevaluation, there should be a great deal of additional information based on classroom performance, and thus, the multidisciplinary team members would be able to rely on more informal process-based data (e.g., extended observations, work samples, and responses to instructional modifications) than on test data for establishing eligibility. The respondents indicated that they frequently looked for additional information to document eligibility, but the reported lack of professional judgment when placing a student suggests that information from the regular class and Student Support Team is either unavailable or not fully utilized. The apparent reliance of the respondents on

severe discrepancy to identify LD students is of special interest in light of the criticism of these formulae in the professional literature (Kavale, 1987; Willson & Reynolds, 1984-85).

Implications

Several training needs emerge from these results. These members of the multidisciplinary evaluation team, especially school psychologists, indicated a need to have additional training in implementing the regulations for determining LD eligibility. One focus of the training should be on evaluating information on the language skills of students referred for LD placement. Whether the information on language skills and processing are actually gathered by the school psychologists and special education teachers or by speech and language pathologists, the members of the multidisciplinary evaluation teams (i.e., psychologists and special education teachers) must be able to interpret language information and to integrate these result with the other available data.

The respondents' concerns about using professional judgment suggests a need for training in collecting and evaluating information beyond the test results in order

to assess how the student processed information, both in the test setting and, more importantly, in the classroom. This information would then provide the documentation for the use of professional judgment. Such an approach requires a shift from emphasizing product evaluation, i.e., test scores, to emphasizing process evaluation, including more emphasis on evaluating work samples, classroom observation, and the students' strategies for approaching and analyzing classroom and test-setting tasks. Training in using Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA) strategies (e.g., Howell & Moreland, 1987) would assist teachers and psychologists to gather data on the students response to instruction and provide members of the multidisciplinary team with the necessary documentation to establish eligibility when test scores do not provide a clear picture of eligibility.

A final area in which training is needed is for clarification of the standards used by monitors from the State Department of Education. Both psychologists and special education teachers indicated concern regarding just what information is needed in order to document eligibility in learning disabilities.

In summary, learning disabilities are a processing disorder which are best viewed as a dynamic interaction between the learner and the instructional task. By viewing learning disabilities as a process, the evaluation of language processing, learning processing, and professional judgment (the very areas about which these professionals felt most concerned) are at the very core of training professionals to assess LD eligibility.

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